

Misplaced Kids by Ghoststar

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Summary:

In which Steve can't find the kids and freaks the hell out.

Misplaced Kids

Steve has to stop for gas- because these fucking gremlins have learned the wonders of peer pressure and how to use it against him- so he's running a few minutes late. That wouldn't normally be a bad thing, since it means the kids get a few extra minutes to hang out with their friends and play arcade games without Steve shouting at them to hurry up. It quickly becomes apparent that this isn't the case.

The kids aren't waiting for him when Steve arrives in the parking lot which is just typical. Steve parks the car and jogs up to the doors, cursing every circumstance that has lead him to this moment where he's having to run through sleet to get a bunch of overgrown toddlers because there's no way in hell he's letting them ride their bikes home in this kind of weather. (What the hell are any of their parents thinking? Some days it feels like the lot of them had barely enough good parental figures to cover one child, much less six.) All things considered, it's a rather long list of grievances.

Things stop being normal about three seconds after he steps in the door. Steve glances around, feeling decidedly out of place among these children and a handful of teenagers his own age who are either die hard gamers or employees. There's about a dozen kids still inside the arcade, even with closing time descending upon them. Steve has half a second to wonder about how all these other kids are getting home before he realizes that of all the kids still in the arcade, none of them are *his*.

Steve sticks his head back outside, looking left and right just to make sure he didn't somehow bypass the kids. They're not outside and he can feel his heart attempting to crawl up and out of his throat. Steve lets the door fall shut behind him as he quickly searches the arcade, going as far as to look in the nooks between machines like they might just be hiding to screw with him. On his third loop of the arcade the employees start giving him odd looks and Steve starts to shake.

Almost frantic, he checks the bathrooms as well. He searches every stall in the boy's, and sticks his head inside the girl's, not caring in the least the he scares the shit out of the teenager inside. The kids are nowhere to be found and Steve is losing his fucking mind.

He snags the first employee he can find- not the Cheetos dude who is also missing, what the hell- and starts interrogating him.

"Have you seen five kids, about this tall, probably talking about nerdy shit?" Steve demands, one hand still clutching the employee's shirt.

The guy stares at him with wide eyes and Steve realizes they go to school together. He's pretty sure they've been in the same year since kindergarten, though that isn't surprising. Hawkins is a small town and everyone knows everybody. Except this fucking guy apparently.

He looks around slowly, taking in all the kids, and then says, "you're going to need to be more specific."

"The girl has red hair and they're all sarcastic little shits." The blank look that meets these words make Steve want to shake the guy. "For Pete's sake, they're like a gang. They call themselves the Party. What kind of arcade guy are you?"

The guy starts slowly prying Steve's fingers off his shirt, patting his hand like that might calm him down. "Chill out, buddy. They probably just went home."

"They better have gone home," Steve snaps and releases the guy. He grabs the phone behind the counter, ignoring the arcade guy telling him it's for employee use only.

Steve is about ready to punt the guy out the damn window.

Steve hesitates, fingers hovering over the buttons. He's probably overreacting. It's probably nothing more than a bunch of teenagers forgetting they asked-demanded- he give them a ride and instead ran off like idiots. There's nothing wrong here. Nothing at all.

Hopefully.

But as much as he hopes everything is fine too much bad shit has happened. He can't shake the worry. It's a struggle between being terrified that the kids have been snatched up by the next Upside Down monster and that fact that he has no proof anything is wrong. He doesn't want to panic anyone if he's just freaking out. He couldn't do that to Joyce or Johnathan, not after everything with Will. And it's

not like he can call and ask Lucas' or Max's parents without first finding a phone book. Calling Hooper would mean calling the police. That really only leaves calling Dustin's mom and then Mike's.

Dustin's mom laughs him off when he calls, telling him that Dustin is probably with his friends. *At the arcade.*

"*I'll let him know you called,*" she promises.

Steve swallows and hangs up, dialing Nancy's number. It rings and rings, continuing on past the point where Steve knows Nancy isn't home and wondering if anyone is. It's one away from going to the machine when someone finally answers.

"*Hello?*" Ted drones and Steve attempts to strangle the phone at the man's blatant apathy in the face of a possible crisis.

"Hey, Mr. Wheeler. Is Mike or Nancy around?"

"*One second,*" Ted says and moves the phone just far away enough away that Steve can still hear him shouting but at least it doesn't hurt. Ted comes back a few minutes later, still droning and bored sounding. "*They're not here.*"

"Do you know where they are?" Steve asks, gritting his teeth.

Ted heaves a sigh. "*One moment,*" he says and resumes shouting across the house at his wife.

Steve drums his fingers on the counter, glaring at the second employee who has joined the first, both watching him cautiously. One tries to ease the phone away from him and Steve clamps down in his hand hard enough to make him flinch. He glares until the other one takes a step back.

"*Nancy's on a date,*" Ted reports. "*Mike is at the arcade with his friends.*"

"Thanks for nothing," Steve snaps and hangs up with a slam. He shoves the phone across the counter and heads for the door.

He takes one last look around the parking lot before hurrying to his car. He knows all the normal hangouts the kids frequent. It shouldn't

take too long to search them all.

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It takes over two hours. He stops by the Sinclair's and meets Erica who switches between asking him dozens of questions and making fun of his hair. Billy is home and Steve is tempted to back over him with his car before Billy finally snaps that Max is hanging with her loser friends. Which Steve already *knows*. He swings by Will's, but there's no cars out front and the lights are off. He goes to the library, to the grocery store where Joyce works, and to Radio Shack. He goes to the ice cream parlor, the diner, and that little art store that Will loves. He even goes to the theater and ends up shouting at the ticket lady until she goes and checks for any wayward kids.

After she reports a lack of children and kicks him out, Steve sits in his car. His breath comes fast and painful, awful thoughts clogging up his head. He can't think of anywhere else to look, not anywhere the kids could have easily reached. Eleven's cabin is too far out and the lake's half frozen over. Even the junk yard is too far away. There is literally no where they could have gone that he can think of.

Steve lets his head thunk again the steering wheel. His head is killing him and his chest hurts. He's cold and wet and the sleet is pelting against his windshield with an unsteady tinkling sound. The kids are missing and he's terrified of all the possible reasons why. The gate could have opened or those creepy governments guys could have come back or any number of ridiculous bullshit that all ends with the kids being injured or dead.

Steve's handle on this situation- and who is he kidding, he never had one- is quickly slipping away from him and he desperately just wants to find them. Even if has to face Hopper and Joyce and the silent accusation that if he hadn't been late maybe the kids wouldn't have disappeared. He doesn't care that he might lose the honorary title of awesome babysitter. He just wants to know where they are and that they're safe.

Steve breathes and the air is so cold it's painful and his nose burns. The smell of fast food has been lingering in his car since the kids talked him into taking them to McDonald's and Dustin lost a couple

fries in his dashboard. Dustin had been gesturing wildly, sending fries flying as he shouted about something. Something about rebuilding a castle and Steve had just assumed the kids were talking about Dungeons and Dragons.

Except the castle was a real thing. Steve remembers that Will telling him about it, about how he and Jonathan had built it together. About how the good and the bad memories associated with it and how a recent storm had destroyed it. Will hadn't been sure if he wanted to rebuild it and Mike had been going along with whatever he wanted. Max and Dustin had been insistent on rebuilding, on improving. Lucas had cited tetanus and opposed the whole idea.

The kids could have finally settled their argument and decided to troop out there before night fell or the weather got any worse. They all knew that the first snow of the season is coming up and any hope of rebuilding will need to be delayed until spring.

Steve sits up, cranking up the car and clicking the windshield wipers on. He racks his brain, trying to remember where exactly this castle was but all he can remember is a general direction leading into the woods. If he goes running off, he'll probably freeze to death before he finds them.

The answer comes and he feels stupid for having forgotten. Will had drawn him a map. It was on his desk along with a dozen other drawings the kids had given him or had forgotten in his car. Fuck, he should have thought of this sooner. What the hell had he been thinking, searching the movie theater. The kids had been steadily blowing every cent they- and Steve- had at the arcade. What kind of shitty babysitter is he that he can't figure that out?

Steve backs out of the lot so fast he almost clips a little old lady. She waves her cane at him and shouts obscenities that fell out of style last century. Steve really doesn't care.

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Steve's yard is dark when he gets there, since he forgot to turn on a porch light. He had never intended to be gone this long. His car door slams shut behind him and he runs up the walkway, sleet crunching

underfoot. He slips once and nearly brains himself on the walkway. He skins his palms on the concrete and it takes him an excruciating long amount of time to find his keys in the dark. When he does, he picks himself up and makes his way up the walk at a slower pace.

He's barely got his key in the lock and the door opened before sudden motion in his hallway has him startling backwards. He hits the door frame hard enough to rattle his own teeth. His startled shout gets lost in the chaos as his hallway fills up with teenagers.

"Dude, where the hell have you been? We've been waiting for ages!" Dustin shouts.

"We nearly froze our asses off before we found your stupid spare key," Max says, folding her arms and glaring at him.

"What were you even doing?" Lucas demands, mimicking Max's stance. Behind him Mike and Will peer at him, one tentative and the other judging. It's those words though that sends Steve careening past relief and straight into fury.

"What was I doing?" He demands and he steps far enough into the house that he can kick the door shut. The pictures on the walls, some artsy bullshit his mom put up the last time she deemed Hawkins worthy of her presence, rattle dangerously. "I've just spent the past two hours looking for you fucking shitheads."

The kids' eyes grow wide and startled. Not so much because of the volume, not with this rambunctious bunch, but the tone. It's not fond or exasperated, not like most of his insults are. His voice shakes with anger and he clenches his hands into fists. He'll feel guilty about it later but at this moment Steve can't be asked to feel anything but anger. He's just spent two hours scared out of his fucking mind and these kids are solely to blame.

"Why?" Mike dares to ask and Steve stares at him.

"What do you mean, *why*? I was suppose to pick you up and when I got there, you were all gone. No one knew where you had went and or why you had left or if you were safe-" Steve's voice cracks and his throat hurts. He struggles to speak around the knot in his throat and

the lingering panic.

"We ran out of money," Max blurts out, blinking rapidly.

Steve can't stand to look at her for another second, instead looking at the other kids who are all equally shamed-faced and teary eyed. They all look guilty, even the ever defiant Mike. It isn't a look he's ever seen on the kids before. These kids are never less than 100% percent convinced that they're right and that they know exactly what they're doing, even when they have lost all control of a situation. Seeing them look otherwise is weird and Steve feels like the biggest asshole in the world.

"We thought we could head you off, but you were already gone when we got here," Dustin continues for Max. His eyes are shiny.

"We thought you'd just come back home," Will finishes.

Steve pinches the bridge of his nose and discovers that even after a month and a half its still tender as fuck. "I couldn't find any of you," Steve says slowly, like he's spelling it out to toddlers. "And no one knew where you were. Did none of you consider how that might look?"

The kids exchange looks that Steve doesn't even try to decipher. He's suddenly horribly tired and he just feels *old*. If this is what being an adult feels like, Steve would like to turn in his resignation.

"We didn't think you'd-" Mike begins, faltering. He gestures at Steve, like that can encompass everything they thought he would and wouldn't do.

"Freak out," Max fills in.

"Yeah that," Lucas agrees, nodding quickly.

"We're sorry," Dustin says and sniffles pitifully.

Steve lets out a sigh and it feels like it takes everything out of him. 'Freak out' does not even begin to do it justice. Steve doesn't think he'll be able to sleep for a week after this shit show. He'll be lucky if he can let them out of his sight without worrying they've been

spirited away to the Upside Down or eaten by some new Democreature. Hell, he'll probably even worry about ordinary human evils like creeps in white vans and serial killers. With these kids, nothing is too out there to worry about.

The anger fizzles out and the relief finally comes. He sags, scrubbing his face with his hands. His eyes water- too much cold wind obviously- and he wipes them quickly before summoning up a glare. He straightens but can't quite meet their eyes. He tries to ignore their intense gazes focused on him.

"Alright, apology accepted," he says and clears his throat. He much be coming down with a cold. "Just don't ever do this shit again."

Dustin finally moves and Steve's sigh of relief oomphs out of him when Dustin nearly tackles him. Dustin's head hits him in the sternum and his arms squeeze so hard that Steve's ribs ache. Steve has no idea what to do with his arms or about this situation. After a second of indecision, he puts one arm around Dustin and uses the other to pat the top of his head.

"We didn't mean to make worry, Steve," Dustin's muffled voice says. Well that's what Steve thinks he says.

"I wasn't worried," Steve scoffs and it's such a blatant lie it's a wonder his pants don't ignite.

"Bullshit," Dustin says.

Dustin clings on tight for another few seconds before his arms loosen. That seems to be some kind of silent signal because the next thing he knows Max and Lucas are wrapped around the rest of him, slowly squeezing the life out of him. How, he wonders, is this his life?

Steve shifts, getting one arm hooked around Max and Dustin, and the other hovering over Lucas. Catching sight of Mike and Will hovering at the edge, he beckons them forward. Will hesitates but comes when Mike pulls on his arm. In a matter of seconds he's got five baby teenagers clinging to him, squishing him like some giant teddy bear. Steve tries to get his arms around all of them but it's a lot harder than he had expected. Somehow he manages, mostly by crushing them all

together.

They stand there for several minutes, in a warm little huddle. Eventually, Steve breaks away from the little heathens and goes to clean up his hands. The kids call home while he's gone, telling their parents that they're going to be late. The five of them- and even with the total of two times Steve's met her, Eleven's absence is noticeable- argue over pizza and Steve ends up ordering three of them, each a half and half with different toppings.

The pizza comes and Steve writes the delivery guy two checks, one for the pizza and the other for a tip. The kids snatch the pizzas and disappear into the living room before Steve even finishes signing his name. By the time he gets there, they've found a disgustingly bad romance movie that they all take turns making fun of while stuffing their faces.

Later, after the pizza is gone and the kids are all moaning and groaning, he drives them all home. He drops the kids off one by one, watching until each have disappear into their houses. By the time he drops off Will, his hands have completely stopped shaking and visions of dead kids have quit dancing behind his eyes.

They're fine, he tells himself later when he stares up at his bedroom ceiling, his house hauntingly quiet after all the noise. Completely fine, he repeats.

The next day he buys four pairs of walkie-talkies. He shoves a pair into Will's hands with directions to teach his mom and brother how to use them. He stops by the police station and gives an amused Hooper one for himself and one for Eleven, demanding he keep his with him always. He ignores the, "kid, I already have a radio." He sends another home with Mike with strict orders to give it to Nancy and another is given to Max. The extra one goes in the trunk of his car, along with a very odd collection of emergency supplies.

The last walkie-talkie he takes to Dustin and demands to be taught how to work it. He leaves with a list of all the channels the kids use, instructions on proper radio etiquette, and with some of the deep set anxiety abetted.

Steve is the furthest out from the rest of the kids, except for Eleven. (For the first time, he's glad that Hawkins is such a small town.) Later, he'll wonder if Eleven's powers extend to manipulating radio waves because she always comes in clearly. Will is on the other side of town, but manages alright.

That night the kids take turns calling his channel. Some of them are fuzzy, Will's crackling badly. Joyce wishes him a goodnight that bursts with static in the middle. Mike puts Nancy on, coaching her through the entire time. The call ends with the two of them bickering. The last to call is a vaguely familiar voice, soft and curious.

"Goodnight, Steve," Eleven says, voice humming over the line.

Steve wishes her the same and lets the walkie-talkie fall next to him on the bed. There it stays as he falls asleep. The relief of knowing the kids are safe and only a call away follows him into his dreams. That night, he doesn't have nightmares of demogorgons or demo-dogs or Billy fucking Hargrove. He dreams of the kids arguing about D&D and pickle flavored ice cream, their voices jumbling together via the walkie-talkies. It's a weird dream but he'll take weird ones over nightmares or frantic panicking any day of the week.

Author's Note:

This wasn't actually the Steve & His Kids thing I was planning on writing, but this was the one that got finished. I kinda have plans on writing a few more, mostly because I just really love Steve and the kids and found family fics are my freaking jam. We'll see how it goes, lol.

p.s- changed accounts, ported fic. Sorry about y'all bookmarks, yo.